# I thought I was *Prepared*

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*Photo by SSgt Cherie A. Thurlby*

Photo by MSgt Mark Bucher

Photo by PHAN Ryan O'Connor

As an Air Force "Hog Driver," I never imagined that I'd end up flying Prowlers with the Navy. I came from a single-seat community and suddenly found myself one of four crewmembers. Two airplanes take off and there are eight people in a two-ship instead of two! (I know, I know, …. "section.") So many new things to get used to. A new airplane, new people, and most of all, a whole different language to learn. It was all beginning to gel for me though and soon enough I found myself on my first deployment to Incirlik AB, Turkey, for Operation NORTHERN WATCH (ONW). On one particular ONW sortie, things reverted from the mundane "Groundhog Day" theme to a bit more excitement than I care to encounter on a regular basis.

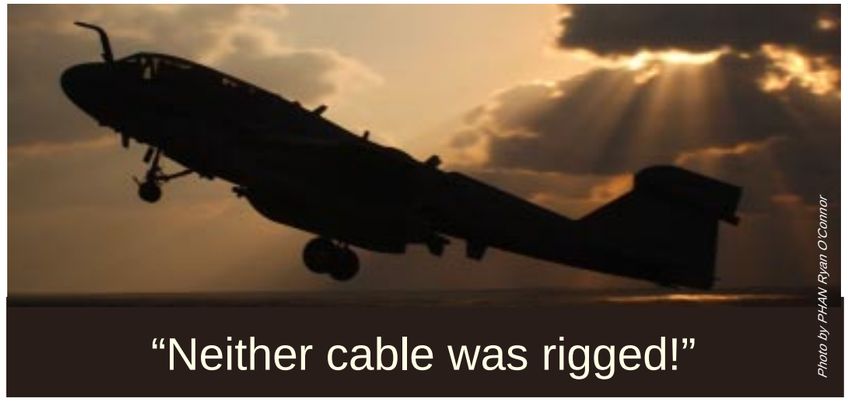
I was leading my section as part of the standard ONW package and things were ops normal as we lined up number one for takeoff in the middle of the launch. Takeoff was standard until cleanup. After raising the gear, I moved the flaps and slat lever to the clean position. As is normal in the Prowler, the jet oscillates quite a bit until the flaps and slats are fully retracted. Unexpectedly, the oscillation felt a little different and more difficult to control than is normally the case. Immediately, I glanced down and realized the horizontal stabilizer had not shifted from dirty throws to clean throws as it should have. This can potentially present a relatively serious controllability problem in the Prowler.

As per NATOPS, I maintained airspeed below 250 KIAS, limiting control inputs as my right-seater (ECMO 1) broke out the checklist for "Stab Shift Failure after Flap Retraction." My wingman was in the midst of executing a 10-second interval takeoff, expecting to rejoin at 300 KIAS. So as not to cause a gross under-run, we made a quick call to dash two informing him that we had a flight control problem and we would be at 230 KIAS. He acknowledged and assumed a chase position ready to assist. As we turned downwind, we declared an emergency and began dumping fuel from the wings. We informed departure of our intention to execute a no-flap, no-slat approach, as well as an approach-end arrestment. Now for a guy coming from an A-10 which had no hook, and never saw the boat going through the Prowler RAG, I had not made an arrested landing before. My only thought at this particular time was not to embarrass myself by missing the wire!

On downwind, we were sent to a single frequency approach channel. For those not familiar, a single frequency approach is standard ops for Air Force bases. This allows all emergency radio calls to be made without having to change radio frequencies. The three critical agencies are up on that channel: approach, tower, and the Supervisor of Flying (SOF) — similar in function to the Air Boss. Not requiring assistance from dash two, we cleared them off. We then announced that we required an approach-end arrestment. When all our ducks were in a row, we turned inbound to set up for the approach.

Having completed all necessary checklist steps, we set up on final, configured for a no-flap, no-slat approach and arrestment. We were subsequently cleared to land. Normally in the daytime I don't use visual glideslope data from either the VASI or other visual aid but given the necessity to fly an ultra-smooth approach in this case, I elected to use the VASI and fly a "one white over three red" approach. I had flown practice no-flap, no-slat approaches as part of our normal requirements but was surprised at just how difficult the airplane was to control with a stab-shift failure. It was not all that scary but it did get my attention.

As we crossed the runway threshold, it dawned on me that the first approach-end cable was a bit shorter than I had anticipated. About 700' from the approach end vice approximately 2,000' back at Whidbey Island. Having flown a slightly flatter approach than normal, I felt confident that we'd catch the first wire. Upon touchdown I knew it would be close but thought we'd catch it. I was told by my salty Navy comrades that a land arrestment is nothing like a trap at the ship. So as we rolled out, I fully expected to begin a relatively rapid slow down, but to no avail. We had not caught the first wire. I thought, surely we were down in time but maybe not. No worries, there was another one a short distance in front of us, we'll catch that one. Crossing the second wire it became apparent that neither wire was rigged! How could this be? We luckily had a very long runway to work with and our tires held together, so with normal braking I was easily able to bring the aircraft to a crawl; however, we did end up with hot brakes.



"Neither cable was rigged!"

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In sorting out the details of this incident a number of misunderstandings took place that were not apparent while the EP was in progress. Somehow, tower was under the impression that we were planning on an opposite direction, approach-end arrestment, therefore, negating the need to rig the approach-end gear, which we thought was being rigged as we flew downwind. This info was relayed to the SOF who also was manning the tower. How they got that idea is still a mystery to me, but more directive, clear, concise directions from us would have alleviated any possibility of confusion. For instance, if we had said, "Request an approach-end arrestment to Runway 5" vice, "Request an approach-end arrestment" would have been more appropriate. In addition, when using a single-frequency approach, it is advisable to direct communication to the agency you wish to hear what you have to say even though all three critical agencies are listening. Finally, the SOF is a handy tool for getting things done and advising on available options. Given enough time, it's a smart play to talk directly to the SOF and give him your game plan for recovering the jet. He may have information that you're not aware of.

When all was said and done, there was no harm, therefore, no foul. The jet was recovered without significant damage with the exception of the stab shift cable which had snapped for an unknown reason. Hindsight being what it is, a little detailed forethought goes a long way for not only how you're going to handle an emergency with regards to NATOPS, but also how best to relay you're game plan and intentions to others.

***Editor's Note:*** *Courtesy of the Naval Safety Center*